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ABSTRACT

Anecdotal reports of students working more in paid employment and studying less have been coming from academics in Australia in recent years. Researchers there are seeing patterns of student disengagement and new forms of engagement to which institutions have not adapted. This paper explores the nature of the shift in forms of student engagement and what it means for universities. Previous research findings have suggested that younger college students who work part-time are likely to spend fewer days on campus, spend less time with other students, and study less consistently throughout the semester. Australia is not alone in these trends. Australian studies mirror those of substantial research from the United States that show a decline in the percentage of students who say that university has had an impact on their personal lives. Recent reports from the American Council on Education confirm the significant impact of paid work on study for U.S. students. The increase in student work is not the only cause of student disengagement. Young people today have a different perspective about their futures and the place of the university experience in their lives. It will be important for policy and practice to reconceptualize the undergraduate experience as a process of negotiated engagement rather than assuming that disengagement is an intractable problem and that students are to blame. A more sophisticated approach to structuring and delivering the curriculum is required. (Contains 12 references.) (SLD)

INAUGURAL PROFESSORIAL LECTURE

SIGNS OF DISENGAGEMENT?
THE CHANGING UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE
IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

Craig McInnis

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The Centre for the Study of Higher Education

The Centre for the Study of Higher Education (CSHE) was established in 1968 as a pioneer endeavour formed from an amalgamation of the teaching office, the education research unit, and the audio-visual unit. The primary function of the Centre was then 'devoted to research into and improvement of academic teaching' and to 'work to bring about changes deemed desirable'.^{*} This is essentially what CSHE continues to do. The Centre provides research-based advice and professional development on matters concerning the transformation of teaching and learning, the student experience, professional development for academics, and quality assurance policies and processes. Current and recent major national projects include: 'What did you do with your science degree?'; 'Which university? From application to first weeks'; 'The changing work roles of academics in Australia 1993-1999'; 'Rural and isolated school students and their higher education choices'; 'The first year experience, 1994-1999'; 'The impact of part-time work on full-time study', and, 'Assessing student learning in Australian universities'.

^{*} Falk, B., and Lee Dow, K. 1971. University Teaching: Reality and Change, *Quarterly Review of Australian Education*, Vol 4 No 4.

SIGNS OF DISENGAGEMENT? THE CHANGING UNDERGRADUATE EXPERIENCE IN AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITIES

Anecdotal reports of students working more in paid employment and studying less have been coming from academics in Australia with particular intensity and frustration in recent times. What we are seeing now, that we predicted from our first national study of student experience six years ago, are patterns of student disengagement and new forms of engagement, to which many institutions, and the system at large, have still not adjusted in much more than an *ad hoc* way. We pointed out then that students would increasingly expect the university to fit with their lives rather than vice-versa (McInnis and James 1995). In this lecture I want to explore the nature of the shift in forms of student engagement and what it means for universities.

Talk of students being less involved with university, or performing poorly compared with previous generations is, of course, nothing new. However, the 'turned off' undergraduates of the 1970s to whom Graham Little referred — the large number 'going through the motions,' 'hard to interest and consistently and increasingly late with their work' — are not the same species as the current generation (Little 1975). In 1972 a number equivalent to nearly half the first year intake of the Arts Faculty at the University of Melbourne dropped out. The main reason given was 'personal and intellectual confusion giving rise to general dissatisfaction'. In contrast, young undergraduates these days are on the whole not confused, and they are mostly quite satisfied with the quality of their experience. They generally know what they want from university, are reasonably certain about the nature of their commitment, and fairly clear about what they expect university to do for them. They are, of course, not necessarily good judges of what is best for them in the long term. It is noteworthy that most first year students in Australia do not want a general education in their first degree, yet our recent study of science graduates, up to ten years after they had completed their first degree, indicated a substantial number who wished they had broadened their undergraduate education (McInnis, Hartley and Anderson 2001).

Student disengagement and apparent lack of commitment presents itself as a problem on a daily basis for academics. This is manifested in, for example, declining numbers in classrooms or requests for special arrangements to meet the demands of paid work. From the student perspective this is essentially an extension of the process of negotiating their level of engagement with the university in the context of choices that far exceeds anything we might have imagined even five years ago. The range of institutions, courses and subjects now available, combined with the increasingly sophisticated access to flexible modes of knowledge delivery and electronically generated communities of learners, puts students in a powerful position to shape the undergraduate experience to suit their own timetables and priorities. The term 'disengagement' is probably misleading since it implies a deficit in attitudes and values on the part of students, and I think that somewhat misjudges their intentions and, in some respects, devalues the nature

of their experience. Taking a deficit view makes it inevitable that our responses to the new realities of student expectations and aspirations will be inadequate. Such a view certainly does not help universities to respond to this generation of highly mobile and technologically connected students, with demands and assumptions that many academics perhaps find difficult to accept.

There are three main concerns underlying this discussion. First, the rather poor understanding we have of the changing forms of student engagement makes universities vulnerable to *ad hoc* solutions, from curriculum design to the provision of student support services. Second, the current ambivalence on the part of universities in defining their role in the face of these changes puts them at risk of becoming overly responsive to what students want rather than what might benefit individuals and society. Finally, it concerns me that the undergraduate experience is changing by default when universities should be demonstrating leadership in structuring the experience, particularly with respect to the design of the curriculum and the management of learning experiences.

Policies and practice to meet the demands of negotiated engagement at both system and institutional level are in the early stages of formation, and there is considerable uncertainty as to how we should proceed. At least part of the problem in responding to these changes is the deeply embedded notion of the 'ideal undergraduate student' and a somewhat romantic notion of the student experience that simply ignores the new realities of student choices, flexible delivery, the pressure to respond to student markets in the face of the decline in government funding, and the emergence of competition from diverse, well-resourced and highly creative alternative providers (McInnis, 2001).

Patterns of disengagement

In our national trend study of the first year undergraduate experience (McInnis, James and Hartley 2000) we noted that students are spending less time on campus and more time working in paid employment. They either seek, or have in their lives, an increasing number of activities and priorities that compete with the demands of university. Aside from the growing impact of part-time work painfully obvious to academics, students have less need to spend time on campus in order to study, or to have access to teaching and learning resources. However, there is also evidence of a declining level of student commitment to university study that is not entirely explained by financial pressure on individuals or the availability of information technology. There has been, for example, an increase in the proportion of students who say they find it difficult to get themselves motivated to study, and also in the number of students finding the study workload difficult to manage. A related trend concerns crucial aspects of study habits and social learning opportunities. For example, students are less likely to study on weekends, and are more likely to frequently rely on friends for course materials.

The changes in patterns of engagement are by no means directly student-driven — they partially reflect the responses of universities to market pressures. For example, universities have promoted a wide array of options for students with combined degrees that might give a competitive edge in the job market. An unintended consequence of this

is the loss of a critical mass in the learning community of the campus-based universities. Our national data suggests a significant increase from 1994 to 1999 in the proportion of students in combined degrees and cross-discipline studies who keep to themselves at university. While we do not yet have trend data on the use of web-based resources, it is clear to even the casual observer that most students now use material on-line from their subjects, or from outside their university, on a regular basis, and that this is influencing their choices and priorities with respect to study, paid work and other activities.

I should note here that the focus of my discussion is primarily on young undergraduates who go directly from school to university since these tend to be the students of most concern with respect to motivation, application, retention and success. Of particular interest is the increase in the number of younger students (those under 25 years) in paid employment, and the number who regard part-time work as their major or sole source of income. The amount of part-time work for many full-time students now more closely resembles the patterns of students typically enrolled part-time. Even on conservative measures, there has been a nine per cent increase in the proportion of full-time students engaged in paid employment and a 14 per cent increase in the mean number of hours they work. The average hours in 1999 on this conservative estimate was 12.5 hours per week, and the proportion who say they work between 11 and 20 hours has increased over the five years 1994-1999 from 32 per cent to 42 per cent.

What does working part-time mean for the experience of university life and study? Our findings suggest that compared with those who do not work, younger first year students who work part-time are more likely to spend fewer days on campus, to not work with other students on areas of their course, and to have studied inconsistently through the semester. They also tend to anticipate getting lower marks, and are more likely to seriously consider deferring at an early point of their student experience. Of course, this washes back on their perception of the quality of the experience; these students are less likely to agree that 'teaching staff are good at explaining things'. We also know that these negative factors are amplified the more hours students work, and that they feel seriously burdened by overcommitment. This is even more pronounced for the 36 per cent who say that worrying about money interferes with their study. The significant increase in the proportion distracted from study by money worries means more students scoring poorly on almost every dimension of what we would regard as a successful first year experience. Declining levels of application and motivation are the most obvious products of financial stress.

I hasten to make the point that I am not proposing that undergraduates should be free of part-time work. There is plenty of evidence from our own and other studies that an optimal amount of part-time work actually improves learning outcomes and organisation skills, and certainly provides students with experience that enhances their personal growth and employability. Students who do not work in paid employment at all are seriously disadvantaged in these respects.

From a pilot survey for a new national study on the impact of part-time work on full-time students we have just commenced, we found that a substantial number of students have

jobs at university they brought with them from school. Although tentative at this point, the pilot results confirm our view that there are fundamental differences within the group of students who work between those who work to live, and those who work to have a lifestyle. While most students work for extras, independence, and travel, around one in five students work to pay for basic needs such as food and rent. However, a clear majority of students still put their classes and academic commitments first. Nevertheless, more than one third said they generally chose classes to fit around their jobs, and agreed that their part-time work gets in the way of their studies. We anticipate that the negative aspects from the pilot will be stronger across the national sample. One aspect we will be exploring in some detail is the extent to which students feel compelled to work to keep their jobs. It seems that 'student-friendly' employers are harder to come by. With respect to disengagement, the pilot results suggest that a substantial proportion of students agree that their social life is mainly off-campus and not connected with their university.

Australia is not alone in these trends. The results of our studies here mirror those of substantial research from the United States that show a decline in the percentage of students who say that university has had an impact on their personal values. On average, US students in the 90s seem to benefit less from university than previous cohorts, and there is clear evidence that student effort has decreased in the past decade. Students appear to be getting higher grades for doing less, and a culture of entitlement is widely reported (Kuh 1998).

From 30 years of surveying first year students in the United States, Astin (1998) and his colleagues recently observed that a major trend in student values has been a notable shift in the juxtaposition of two contrasting values: 'developing a meaningful philosophy of life' and 'being well-off financially'. These two values have reversed places since the late 60s with being very well-off financially now the top value for 74% of students. Astin also reports, nevertheless, that academic engagement is declining. There has been a marked drop in students spending at least six hours per week studying, an increase in the numbers who report 'oversleeping' and missing class, and fewer students spend time asking teachers for advice about their work. Alongside this has been an increasing concern about finance and their ability to pay for college. Students are now more materialistic and more of them expect university to help achieve their instrumental goals. They are also feeling more overwhelmed by everything they have to do. The positive news is that the most recent survey yet to be published shows a plateau in this trend with some indication that the level of intrinsic interest in learning is improving.

Recent reports from the American Council on Education confirm the significant impact of paid work on study: in one national survey of undergraduates, approximately four-fifths were working while taking classes. Of the full-time students who had some paid employment, about one in five were actually working full-time. Twenty-seven percent of full-time students worked between 21 and 34 hours per week during term. In another study, of high-school seniors planning to attend college the majority were planning to seek employment to pay college expenses and for what the report describes as 'social reasons' — to buy clothes, pay for entertainment and holiday travel. Finally, a new and

significant development is the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) from Indiana University aimed at establishing benchmarks for effective practice in universities. It has shown that while most students report experience with collaborative and active learning, and see their universities as providing a supportive environment, they have only occasional contact with their teachers and spend about half of the time expected in preparing for class (Kuh 2001:13).

The changing outlooks and priorities of young people

The increase in student part-time work is by no means the sole cause of disengagement. The changes in the undergraduate experience of young people have to be understood in the context of the broader shifts in their outlooks and priorities. What it indicates is a far more fundamental shift in the ways many young people now see the university experience. They have a quite different perspective on their futures and the place of the university experience in the scheme of things. They are heading towards what Don Edgar describes as 'thin relationships between footloose workers in the global market place' in contrast, incidentally, to an opposing trend of 'thicker family relationships' for some (Edgar 1999:43).

A study conducted by Christine Kilmartin of the Australian Institute of Family Studies from its 1998 Young Adults' Aspirations Survey showed some distinct patterns of change in the values, lifestyles and aspirations of the respondents to those of previous generations in their twenties. The largest group in the sample (42 per cent) had done none of the things considered to be major rites of passage towards family formation — they had not married, lived in a *de facto* relationship, had children, or a mortgage. Leaving home early and then returning for substantial periods is now a common pattern. Of those who had left home, 53 per cent had returned at some stage. Similar trends have been observed in the United States where 56 per cent of current college students plan to live with their parents for some time after their graduation (Paul 2001). Attitudes towards graduates living at home are changing in the US where they are no longer seen as lacking independence but making rational financial decisions. Money that would otherwise be spent on survival becomes discretionary income for lifestyle maintenance, and enhancing the capacity to pay back student loans, save or invest. Pamela Paul makes the point that traditional views about life after colleges are changing and that 'major life decisions are (now) delayed and jumbled into entirely different patterns....'

Some insightful observations on the broader trends underlying student disengagement come from the *Life Patterns* project of Johanna Wyn and Peter Dwyer which has followed around 2000 young people over ten years who are now in their late twenties. This suggests that by the end of the 1990s there was a shift towards 'more complex life patterns and a blending or balancing of a range of personal priorities and interests' (2000:149). The young people they followed are aware of their foreclosed options and are 'already moving beyond the narrow career investments to which they had been led to aspire while at school' (2000:152). Furthermore:

Young people's identities can no longer be based to the same extent around the achievement of careers, and nor can they be based on the postponement of 'life' while they invest in study. The certainty that a previous generation derived from this process is gone. (2000:158)

Likewise, notions of certainty of career paths are less relevant to an increasing number of students, and efforts to improve or change levels of student commitment to university should not be based on the assumption that the value of student identity that comes from engagement with the university experience is a self-evident good. This is especially critical if Hugh Mackay's assessment of the rising generation is accurate. He argues that this highly-educated and over-stimulated group has been taught to 'keep their options open; to keep an open mind; to wait and see; to hang loose; to postpone commitment.' (1999:52). Negotiated engagement of the undergraduate experience is part and parcel of this broader picture.

RESPONDING TO THE NEW REALITIES OF NEGOTIATED ENGAGEMENT

The first response to the trends I have identified is to revise our assumptions about the student experience, and to rethink the conceptual models on which our research is based. There has been a great deal of evidence to guide the development and delivery of effective undergraduate programs as we have known them over the last twenty or so years. In that large body of research, the quality and intensity of student engagement with the institutional experience stands out as a factor contributing to student outcomes. Chickering and Ehrmann (1997) reconsidered the implementation of the well-known 'Seven Principles for Good Practice in Undergraduate Education', for an era when new communication and information technologies have become major resources for teaching and learning. These principles, distilled from research evidence, have been widely recognised and used in planning and evaluation in universities throughout the United States and Canada. They emphasise the importance of social interaction in undergraduate learning: contacts between students and staff; reciprocity and co-operation among students; active learning techniques; giving prompt feedback; student time on task; communicating high expectations; and, respecting diverse talents and ways of learning.

The authors argue that there is nothing in these principles which is incompatible with greater use of the new technologies, if properly handled. In fact, technology offers new ways of realising these goals, and can augment face-to-face teaching in valuable ways. They point, for instance, to 'one of the earliest surprises about computers': the extent to which they encourage spontaneous student collaboration (1997:2). But they insist that both staff and students need to be assertive and tough-minded in assessing whether individual courses of study are in fact following these principles in their use of technology. However, what they did not account for in their re-assessment of the principles is the shift in the nature of student engagement I have described.

The models of the student experience that have dominated our thinking have put institutional control at the centre. They assume that the pre-entry attributes, goals and commitments of students are best shaped by a process of personal and normative

integration that transforms their perspectives and outlooks. The amount of effort students put into their academic studies, and their involvement in the life of the university, was identified as the key to success (Pascarella and Terenzini 1991). Initial group differences in student backgrounds were found to be largely indirect in their effect on learning outcomes, and their impact relatively slight. The researchers concluded that most of the changes in student behaviours and outlooks are the product of a range of 'interrelated and mutually supporting experiences' provided both in and out of the classroom and accumulated over time. Nearly every outcome area — for example, intellectual flexibility — appears to be embedded within an interconnected mutually reinforcing network of cognitive, value, attitudinal and psycho-social changes.

In contrast to this large body of research from the 1980s, there is precious little research available right now to guide our policy and practice related to the student experience. Pascarella and Terenzini (1998) have reviewed their work in the light of the changes in higher education and conclude that the indicator of 'instructional effectiveness' used in the impact studies has been narrowly defined. They point to the lack of knowledge of the effectiveness of technology-based courses on other learning outcomes such as learning-related attitudes and values. The interaction between the instructional medium, the method, the task, and student is poorly understood. Moreover, they see the need to question the assumption that face-to-face student-staff is critical to teaching and learning in a cyberspace environment.

We have to ask if we are judging the nature and extent of student engagement by standards and measures that are no longer appropriate. Trying to recreate the campus-based experience from a distance may be seriously distracting from the potential of new technologies. While there may be far more to the effective undergraduate experience than instruction, to achieve these outcomes in the face of negotiated engagement means that the social dimensions of the campus-based experience will have to be managed with considerably more skill and resources than in the past. These experiences will not happen without intervention as might have been the case when small numbers of students studied and played their way through courses together.

The next question then is just how much responsibility universities should assume for managing the nature and level of student engagement, and then, how much they can really achieve? In the section that follows I summarise some aspects of university structure and organisation that are central to any strategic response to the patterns of student engagement — the role of the universities in the design and management of the undergraduate curriculum, the need for renewed efforts to create a sense of learning community, and issues of infrastructure and support for the total student experience.

The curriculum as an organising device

Defining the curriculum as an organising device is probably the key to universities shaping the future of the effective undergraduate experience. Since the serendipity of student-student and staff-student interaction for campus-based learning can no longer be assumed, more sophisticated curriculum design and management is needed. Universities

will have to convince students and society that they offer a distinctive experience and that the graduate attributes they aim to cultivate in the curriculum are first rate. Universities can bring together the total student experience through creative design of the structure and organisation of the curriculum. This may mean, however, making some hard decisions about the point at which student choice and flexibility in delivery of the curriculum becomes self-defeating, and asserting on the basis of clear indicators that the cohesiveness of the content and the process adds value that only universities as generators of knowledge can add. It also means that universities and individual academics need to get from students a clear commitment to taking responsibility in the process, even if this has to be formalised as part of the course requirements and assessment process.

Students are increasingly likely to move away from coherent course structures wherever it is possible to gain a competitive advantage in the labour market: unless they can be convinced that the quality of the integrated experience is worthwhile. To address this, universities need to reassert and maintain the importance of coherence and integrity in curriculum design. Coherence is not the same as consistency and order. Coherence advances learning and promotes independence and autonomy for the learner. Consistency on the other hand aims to remove ambiguity and confusion for the students by making things more ordered, but inevitably fosters dependence (Gaff and Ratcliff 1996). In the flexible delivery, learner-centred, user-pays environment, coherence is at risk when we create a multitude of subject options from a maze of providers and then react by becoming more prescriptive when students make poor choices, fail or even fail to complete, and complain. Students are now more generally exposed to making inappropriate choices, and they are not necessarily sufficiently informed to make the kinds of subject and assessment choices that will most benefit their development. Putting subjects into order and devising systems to manage them is a superficial response. The danger is that they may react inappropriately to their insecurity in the face of a fragmented curriculum by over-systematising, controlling and monitoring options and choices. In a word, training. Worse, this training exacerbates the process of student disengagement from the university where the learning experience becomes tied up in an 'iron-clad contract, with no allowance for adaptation or detour' (Marchese 1998:4).

Clearly, the pace of change has been such that research is following in the wake of innovations and policy. The Educational Resources Information Centre (ERIC) in the US is currently calling for proposals for monographs on 'The impact of technology on students', 'Assessing the quality of the undergraduate experience', and 'Core curriculum'. The latter study has been prompted by the calls of external stakeholders on institutions to defend what they are teaching and to identify their core curriculum. My colleague Richard James and myself have commenced a long term CSHE project examining the place of the undergraduate curriculum in Australia — its complexity, credibility, and coherence. The underlying message is that there has been surprisingly little conceptual or empirical work on the curriculum, and if universities are to take the initiative on curriculum matters they need to do so from a reflective rather than reactive mindset. Many stakeholders in the US feel, as another ERIC proposal puts it, that academic leaders have 'failed in their responsibility to exert a strong, systematic vision of

what an institution's curriculum should be'. As elsewhere, Australian universities have been under pressure from a complex web of stakeholders, and in trying to satisfy everyone, the curriculum in many cases has become overloaded, fragmented and far from cohesive.

The policy significance of universities asserting their role in curriculum design should not be overlooked. In a recent address to the Business Higher Education Round Table the DETYA First Assistant Secretary of Higher Education, Michael Gallagher, made the point that the production function of higher education is being transformed and that, amongst other things, the modularisation of curricula and the growth of virtual delivery are potentially far-reaching. Of interest to the engagement question, he observed of modules that 'unless they are particularly well-designed, they may threaten educational coherence and limit opportunities for learning to learn, hence eroding foundations' (Gallagher 2001). Gallagher raises the question 'to what extent has the substance of higher education changed away from professional preparation and laying the foundation of knowledge...?' The role of the undergraduate degree in laying such a foundation will be influenced to a significant extent by the capacity of universities to manage the nature and extent of student engagement with the university. The curriculum is the glue that holds knowledge and the broader student experience together and enables the knowledge to be used effectively by the student.

Creating and managing learning communities

An integrated experience whereby the social interaction adds value to the intellectual outcomes will not happen by itself. Promoting managed learning communities has been an increasingly common response to the loss of opportunities in the undergraduate years for interaction, integration and sense of student identity. Learning communities take many forms but primarily aim to provide the advantages of traditionally small cohesive groups of students moving together through their courses as a cohort. They are often grouped around particular subject themes. Replicating the climate and activities of courses with small tightly-knit cohorts can apply to individual classrooms, on-line communities, or even university-wide programs. Whatever form they take requires skilful design and management, especially with the extremely large classes and complex timetables of comprehensive universities. The major focus in curriculum and course organisation is to increase the amount of time students can interact with their peers and with academics. This involves designing and managing an array of learning experiences in the classroom as well as creating opportunities for incidental informal social experiences.

These developments are by no means new or startling innovations. What is new is the imperative to design and manage what once usually occurred naturally when students in small classes spent most of their time together. The mark of success for such learning environments is the seamlessness of in-class and out-of-class learning. When students enjoy studying together they study more regardless of the time and place of learning (Tinto 1998).

Issues for university organisation and infrastructure

Less time on campus does not necessarily mean there is a reduced need for support infrastructure and support services — the opposite is true. However, it comes as no surprise that policy makers are asking how much these support programs cost, and what, if any, additional services can be purchased and by whom? While significant groups of undergraduates will continue to use campus-based facilities, it is highly unlikely that the majority will reduce their part-time work and increase their commitment to university life without substantial incentives, or the imposition of disincentives. Many universities are currently rethinking what they need to provide on-site with respect to facilities and how they will fund and manage the use of them. As with curriculum organisation, they risk exacerbating the problems of disengagement if they go down the path of convenience shopping, encouraging students to put their academic commitments even further down the list of priorities. These academic and support strategies must be seamlessly managed and totally complementary if they are to be effective.

There are outstanding examples of best practice in rethinking support systems and infrastructure right across the system. In response to our work on the first year experience at least one university has appointed a senior administrator as director of 'Campus Life', and many now have highly effective transition programs for first year students, links to employers, and a generally professional approach to enhancing the student experience. However, as students withdraw from the day to day campus life it becomes more difficult to justify the expensive infrastructure. Providing support structures and resources that exacerbate the problem without any regard to the purposes of the undergraduate experience is simply keeping the customer satisfied.

There is little doubt that universities will need to reorganise the academic year to accommodate the increasingly diverse demands from undergraduate students to manage paid work and study. Many are making considerable efforts on this front. Summer schools appear to be back in favour in the United States as students adapt to shifts in the economy and the growth of paid work opportunities that no longer coincide with summer breaks. This happens to complement the need to reduce the crowding on campuses and to allow more effective use of institutional resources. The evidence from earlier efforts to promote summer schools is not all that favourable, but again it must be said that we are dealing with a quite different set of student motives and expectations.

Re-organising the academic year may actually be one of the most effective ways for universities to promote more effective engagement if students can be encouraged to spend at least some period of intense effort alongside other students at key points of their course. However, it is a two-edged sword. The worst outcome would be providing even greater opportunity for students to minimise their engagement leading to a further decline in the sense of a learning community and fragmentation of the curriculum content. This will occur unless there is strategic management based on clearly articulated principles of effective undergraduate teaching.

As a counter to the trend towards a narrow focus on instruction in the assessment of what happens in universities, we developed new measures of the student experience for use as part of national and institutional performance indicators (McInnis, Griffin, James and Coates 2001). The measures attempt to capture the total student experience including: the quality of student support available to students; the learning resources appropriate to their needs; and a series of items related to student perceptions of the social experience of learning at university that indicate their sense of belonging to a community — where learning with other people is a priority. This development, commissioned by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs, provides an indication of the seriousness that government and universities are attaching to the broader dimensions of the student experience. It is also an important step towards convincing other stakeholders that the work of universities involves more than the transmission of knowledge to undergraduates.

Conclusion

To refer back to my major underlying concerns. We simply do not know enough about the changing motives, values and expectations of undergraduate students in relation to their level of engagement. To focus on just those who are working and at risk of failing or discontinuing is missing the point. Likewise it is a serious error to only be concerned if disengagement has an impact on academic performance as measured by grades. If students are able to miss a large proportion of the material they are supposed to learn, or to avoid developing and practising skills considered foundational in whatever field, then they, the universities, and society are the poorer. Universities are then quite rightly exposed to the charge that much of what students do on campus that was once considered core business is actually marginal and an extravagance. If academics are not supported in their efforts to set limits on student absence and demands for special consideration because university sits low on personal priorities, then academics become part of the problem. And, as I have suggested earlier, this certainly does not add up to negotiated engagement but disengagement by default. I am convinced that most students want to be challenged by what university has to offer, unless of course we co-conspire with them to make the experience undemanding. Providing the right mix of strong demands and support is what makes a cultivating learning climate, and it is this that marks out the territory of the distinctive campus-based experience (Little 1975). However, as I have emphasised, it no longer occurs by accident and it is going to take a considerably more strategic approach to create this environment than it might have thirty years ago.

It is more accurate and more useful for policy and practice, to re-conceptualise the undergraduate experience as a process of negotiated engagement rather than assuming disengagement is an intractable problem and that students are to blame. If universities continue in the direction they are now heading, the confluence of student negotiated engagement, markets and technologies will only serve to define the undergraduate experience in ways that create more opportunities for alternative providers. All this adds up to the need for a much more sophisticated approach to structuring and delivering the curriculum. It is unrealistic and quite perverse to expect academics to do this without the support of a substantial group of highly professional specialists. While the role of student

responsibility in their learning and development cannot be overlooked, universities also have an obligation to ensure that students are obliged to engage and understand the significance of the need to commit.

We are in urgent need of creative ideas to address the changing nature of student engagement while holding fast to the notion of the cultivating climate of the university as a defining feature of the undergraduate experience. It is pointless to imagine that we can simply recreate the past when class sizes were small, students came to university with commonly shared experiences, and academics left their doors open to encourage chance conversations. We have to work with these new realities without necessarily yielding to them. It is also a serious error and quite naïve to assume that we can change the nature and level of student engagement by, for example, regulating the hours students work. It is equally foolish to eschew the leadership role that universities should be playing in ensuring that the undergraduate years provide an experience that is more than the narrow acquisition of discipline knowledge and skills. Getting students, government and the community to understand and value the broader dimensions of the university experience, and to commit to them, is easier said than done, but we have no option.

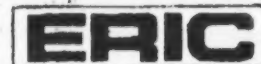
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